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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [PINR](#) [SNAR](#) [CO](#)

SUBJECT: SUCRE DEPARTMENT: STRUGGLING WITH SECURITY AND
SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

Summary

1. (C) During a visit to Sincelejo, capital of Sucre Department, Embassy officials observed that security is improving only slowly in this traditionally violent area, where the Uribe administration briefly gave the police and military state-of-emergency powers in 2002. The notorious Montes de Maria region has a permanent police presence, seizures of illegal drug shipments and civilian road travel are increasing, and certain acts of terrorism have decreased. However, murders and attacks on rural estates are on the rise, and the region is increasingly dominated by a paramilitary strongman, who has completely disregarded the AUC cease-fire. The FARC and ELN have maintained a presence in central Sucre. Socially and economically, the department faces daunting challenges, including a large internally displaced population, high unemployment, and illiteracy. End Summary.

Former Rehabilitation Zone Struggling for Security

2. (C) Sucre Department is notorious for guerrilla and paramilitary violence, especially in the central region of Montes de Maria, where the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have a strong presence and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) have been vying for dominance since about 2000. In 2001, the AUC massacred 21 civilians in Chengué, a small village in the Montes de Maria region. Violence and instability in the Montes de Maria area led the Uribe administration to designate central Sucre one of two "rehabilitation and consolidation zones" in 2002, which gave the police and military state-of-emergency powers. These expanded powers were short-lived, however, as the Constitutional Court abolished the zones several months after they were established. Since that time, the government has made slow progress in combating violence and illicit activity in the department. There are almost 1,500 members of the Colombian National Police (CNP) in Sucre, and the departmental commander told us his goal is to work with department's Marine and Army units to reduce crime and increase operations by ten percent each.

-- Last year, all six municipalities in the Montes de Maria received squadrons of rural mounted police ("carabineros"). Several of these municipalities had never had a police presence and had become accustomed to FARC influence. The department has one EMCAR (mobile police squadron) of 150 police.

-- The two principle highways leading to Cartagena and Barranquilla, which illegal armed groups use for drug trafficking and illegal roadblocks, are closed after 6:00 p.m. Highway police patrol the roads and the police commander told us that travel, especially by tourists driving to the coast, has increased. During the trip, Embassy officials drove several hours from Monteria, Cordoba Department, to Sincelejo.

-- Drug seizures in the department are increasing. Earlier this year, the police seized a 700 kilogram shipment of cocaine -- the largest seizure ever in Sucre -- on its way to Cartagena.

-- So far in 2004, there have been no reported illegal roadblocks and only five kidnappings. In 2003, by comparison, there were five roadblocks and 43 kidnappings, and 11 roadblocks and 51 kidnappings in 2002.

3. (C) Nevertheless, the department's security situation remains tenuous, and paramilitary and FARC presence is a serious problem. Murders increased by three percent between January and September of 2004, and guerrilla attacks on rural estates are a growing problem. As of September 1, nine ranches had been burned.

AUC Cease-Fire Disregarded

14. (C) Nearly all our interlocutors emphasized that paramilitary commander Rodrigo Antonio Mercado Pelufo (alias "Rodrigo Cadena") exerts significant control over Sincelejo and most of the department's coastal municipalities and is vying for dominance in the Montes de Maria region. There are an estimated 400 paramilitary fighters in Sucre. Although Mercado is formally a member of the AUC's Northern Bloc -- commanded by Salvatore Mancuso -- and should be obeying the unilateral cease-fire the AUC declared in 2002, all our interlocutors agreed that he is conducting business as usual: drug trafficking, struggling with guerrillas over territory, and intimidating the public. The departmental police commander assured us that Cadena is the police's number one paramilitary target. Cadena was implicated in the Chengue massacre and the murder of a judge in 2002.

15. (C) A human rights NGO affiliated with the University of Sucre, as well as the Roman Catholic Bishop of Sincelejo, questioned the local government's commitment to capturing Cadena and combating the paramilitaries. The NGO noted that Cadena is widely known to have a home in Sincelejo's most posh neighborhood but authorities look the other way. The Bishop complained that many city government officials are AUC sympathizers who come from families that have long supported paramilitary activity. He said guerrilla control over many rural government officials is equally troubling.

Guerrillas: Still in Montes de Maria

16. (C) The FARC's 35th and 37th fronts, with about 200 members each, operate in rural areas of Montes de Maria and elsewhere in central and southern Sucre. The National Liberation Army's (ELN) Jaime Bateman Canyon Front cooperates closely with the FARC. Although the guerrilla presence has been mostly eliminated in Sincelejo, it is still a major source of concern for the security forces in rural areas. A former mayor of one of the Montes de Maria municipalities noted that in 2000 she was the only mayor who was not forced to govern her municipality by proxy from Sincelejo. With the increased police presence today, all six mayors govern from their towns, although FARC death threats and attacks on ranches continue.

Pressing Social Problems

17. (C) Economically and socially, Sucre is in dire straits. According to our interlocutors, Sucre has one of the highest rates of illiteracy and internally displaced persons in the country. There are between 60,000 and 90,000 displaced persons in Sucre (primarily in Sincelejo), most of whom have been displaced by violence elsewhere in Sucre or in the departments of Antioquia or Choco. Since Sucre's total population is only 600,000, the displaced population may be as high as 15 percent. Upon taking office, the mayor installed streetlights and built several roads in Sincelejo's poorest neighborhoods and is building or expanding six elementary schools with assistance from the government of Japan. However, both he and the governor expressed frustration at their inability to provide adequate assistance to the displaced and unemployed.

WOOD